

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION with Richard Goodwin, Cambridge, Mass.,
18 October 1967

Subject: Kennedy's Decision-Making on Vietnam, 1961-1963

1. Goodwin asserts, off the record, that the President had told him privately in the late fall of 1961 that he was determined not to send U.S. combat forces to Vietnam, and not to bomb. [Comment: The JCS, Taylor, and, on the record, McNamara, were urging Kennedy at this point to send some combat forces immediately, and to make the definite decision of willingness to send more if needed; Taylor and Rostow also raised, at this point, the possible desirability of bombing North Vietnam if infiltration continued. Kennedy rejected the recommendations to send combat troops at that time, and so far as the record shows, he resisted pressure then and later to make a definite internal commitment to send troops later if necessary. According to Goodwin, it was his private decision at this time not to send troops.] Goodwin stresses that this does not mean that Kennedy definitely would not either have committed U.S. combat forces or initiated bombing, after 1963, if confronted by the situation and alternatives that LBJ later faced. He might have done so whatever his state of mind in 1961. But Goodwin believes this less likely than not. The period during which the Kennedy incumbency would have made a difference, Goodwin believes, was 1964, when much more attention would have been given to the possibility of a political settlement even on terms unfavorable to earlier U.S. aims. By the fall of 1964, Goodwin, confronting chaos and imminent defeat in Vietnam, and assuming an electoral victory, Goodwin believes that Kennedy would have turned to a Laotian-type political settlement for South Vietnam; and he believes that such a possibility was in Kennedy's mind as early as 1961, as preferable to escalation in the event of failure of the limited (though increased) U.S. involvement he was undertaking.

2. Goodwin agreed that the pattern of apparent withdrawal from confrontation with the communists in Laos, the Bay of Pigs, and the Berlin Wall formed precedents that Kennedy was compelled to contradict rather than to confirm when faced with a challenge in South Vietnam. Moreover, his policy with respect to Laos could only be sustained bucauratically if paired with a policy of holding the line in South Vietnam. However, Goodwin emphasizes even more than the association with Laos policy Kennedy's relations with Khrushchev and the need to send appropriate "signals" to the Soviet Union. The on-going crisis over Berlin influenced Kennedy's policy in November with respect to South Vietnam in two directions; on the one hand, he did not wish at that time to give Khrushchev another indication of weakness which might tempt him to further pressure on Berlin (as the White House feared might have been the effect of our acceptance of the Berlin Wall), but at the same time Kennedy did not want to get involved in actual conflict in Southeast Asia at a time when maximum attention and resources were needed for Berlin. These two considerations worked toward his choice of a policy that maintained our commitment and increased our involvement in South Vietnam without actually committing combat forces.

3. With reference to the advice that Kennedy received in writing at this time from McNamara, the JCS and Taylor, to the effect that policy based on an advisory and support effort alone, without U.S. forces, would have sharply reduced chances of success, Goodwin commented: (a) such advice would tend to be discounted by the President because recommendations were so often put in this form merely to force the President's hand or to establish a position for the record; (b) it would be a characteristic pattern, and Goodwin did guess on general grounds that it applied in this instance, for such sharply drawn recommendations to be attenuated in informal, private conversations by one or more of the parties. In this instance, Goodwin's memories of McNamara's general position during this period led him to guess strongly that McNamara probably did take a different position on the essentiality of U.S. ground forces when speaking to the President in person than he did in a formal written recommendation that implied the concurrence of the JCS. Goodwin's guess is that when the President expressed great reluctance to send U.S. combat forces, McNamara probably assured him that the job could be done without them, at least initially, and that little or nothing would be lost by a sequential decision in which the advisory effort was first enlarged; postponing a decision on combat forces, he might well have gone further to make the judgment that the job could be done entirely without combat forces. This guess is based not only on common patterns of bureaucratic -- and McNamara -- behavior, but upon recollections of McNamara's mood of optimism about the prospects of the advisory and support effort within Vietnam. The effect of this speculation is to suggest that Kennedy might not have felt so isolated from the views of his principal advisors on this question, at the time of making his final decision, as the written record would suggest. In general, as Goodwin rightly observes, "the written record shows you only the bright side of the moon; the dark side, that you don't see, are the telephone and private face to face conversations."

4. Goodwin asserts definitely that Kennedy returned from Vienna with the conviction that Khrushchev had sized him up as a young man who could easily be bluffed or coerced; Kennedy regarded this as a dangerous image in Khrushchev's mind, one that it was highly important to change. He attempted to do so with his speeches and deployments with respect to Berlin; but worried that the effect of these had been undercut by his decision on the Berlin Wall. Aside from Vienna, Goodwin feels (and believes that Kennedy also judged) that the effect of the Bay of Pigs on Khrushchev's assessment was even greater than the effect of Kennedy's Laos policy. The Russians could understand our reluctance not to become involved in Laos and probably did not draw sweeping inference from that to our behavior in Europe, whereas they would probably have regarded it as natural to have backed up the involvement in the Bay of Pigs, once undertaken, with U.S. troops when called for, and Kennedy's refusal to do this almost surely looked like weakness to Khrushchev. All of this does have a bearing on Kennedy's reluctance to show weakness in South Vietnam in the fall of 1961, however compromising the situation might have seemed.

5. On Kennedy's actual expectations with respect to South Vietnam: Goodwin stresses very much (as do other biographers of Kennedy years) that South Vietnam was a very small problem in 1961, one that drew very little Presidential attention, relative to such matters even as Laos, let alone Berlin and nuclear testing. In this context, Goodwin also feels that there was a strong mood of optimism in New Frontier circles about the potential effectiveness of "counter insurgency" tactics, and the need as well as the possibility of meeting the communist challenge at this new level of aggression. Goodwin agrees that Kennedy probably did underestimate somewhat the extent to which an investment of thousands of U.S. advisors would in the future increase the U.S. commitment, i.e., make a future withdrawal more difficult. He did certainly realize that the commitment was being reaffirmed and increased, but almost surely believed that he retained the ultimate ability to limit or reduce it. However, it was also true that Kennedy's own visits to Indochina had led him to be more skeptical of the possibilities there and more sensitive to the critical role of political factors than were most of his advisors.

6. On advice in 1963: Goodwin confirms that the alternatives to Diem's rule were essentially unanalyzed by those who proposed his overthrow, with none of the darker possibilities being really foreseen. Moreover, no one, to Goodwin's knowledge raised the desirability of withdrawing our commitment to South Vietnam in the circumstances that confronted us. Nor was the consideration raised that support of a coup would constitute a further morally binding commitment to the conflict in Vietnam for the U.S., and, in particular, for those policy makers who participated in this decision.

7. Goodwin characterizes Rusk's policy with respect to the South Vietnam issue in 1961 as one of avoiding association, so far as possible, with what he probably suspected was a losing or compromising situation. Goodwin believes that this has been a characteristic pattern in Rusk's career, and a successful one bureaucratically. In other words, his response to doubts he may have felt about the feasibility of our effort in South Vietnam would characteristically be, and was, to allow dominant responsibility to shift to McNamara and the Defense Department for affairs in South Vietnam.